

# Eliminate a myth, close a gap

**N**SDC's purpose is a rallying cry for improving student learning: "Every educator engages in effective professional learning every day so every student achieves."

The purpose statement includes three elements. It describes who, how, and for what. Often as education leaders talk about professional learning, they focus on those learning professionally and neglect the primary reason for the learning. The result of effective professional learning is learning for every student. Not some. Not most. Everyone.

Coaches and teacher leaders have a crucial responsibility to confront beliefs and practices that interfere with the results NSDC advocates. The simple fact is this: Education is uneven and inequitable. Some students have access to learning opportunities that others do not. Those in historically low-performing schools or with large numbers of students living in poverty often experience an education program that falls below what their counterparts in wealthier or higher-performing schools experience.

In some schools "blamestorming" rather than brainstorming is a common practice. Educators find it is easier to identify the reasons students can't achieve rather than imagine how to guarantee that they do. Yet teachers are incredibly resourceful and inventive. Given a challenge and an opportunity to move beyond reasons students can't learn, they will discover ways to ensure they do.

Coaches who work with teachers who see problems more readily than possibilities often are frustrated with peers whose views are less positive. How do coaches help teachers shift their perspective and practice to provide every student opportunities to learn? Perhaps the best strategy is to provide examples of success.



## NSDC STANDARD

**Equity:** Staff development that improves the learning of all students prepares educators to understand and appreciate all students, create safe, orderly, and supportive learning environments, and hold high expectations for their academic achievement.

The Education Trust, a Washington, D.C.-based not-for-profit educational organization, highlights schools that have closed the achievement gap. Its president, Kati Haycock, in an address at Bridge to School Reform, the Wallace Foundation's National Conference in October 2007, noted that national trends in student achievement indicate that the gap between white and black students and between white and Latino students is narrowing. Schools are demonstrating that they can overcome some of the factors often cited as the reason for poor student academic performance. The news is particularly good for elementary school students and more uneven for middle and high school students.

Strikingly, Haycock points to trend data that suggest that the choices made by both policy makers and educators contribute to these inequities. Policy makers choose to spend less on schools with large populations of poor or minori-



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ty students. Educators, too, contribute by lowering their expectations, providing less rigorous instruction, and placing less experienced teachers in schools with poor and minority students.

“When you add up the effects of both sets of choices — both the choices that policy makers make and the choices that we educators make — the results are devastating,” says Haycock. “The gap that separates poor kids from middle class kids and kids of color from white kids grows wider and wider the longer they remain with us in school” (p. 27).

The Education Trust studies schools and districts that have reversed the trend and have begun to close the gap by studying schools and districts where student performance is increasing and the

gaps are minimal. Lessons about what leaders do can inform the work of district leaders, principals, teacher leaders, and school and district leadership teams. Here are several of those lessons:

**Focus on what can be changed rather than what can't.** Teachers, teacher leaders, principals, and district leaders are concerned about the life conditions facing many students. However, their primary focus is on ensuring that students experience the highest quality teaching every day and that instruction is rigorous, aligned with state standards, and has high expectations for student success. Identifying students who can benefit from extra support, targeting interventions to specific students, and celebrating success are strate-

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gies for helping teachers develop a deeper understanding of how they do influence students' academic success.

**Little is left to chance.** District leaders hold high expectations of principals, and principals in turn hold high expectations of teachers. Coaches step in to support teachers who want to refine teaching, assessment, and planning so that teachers meet every student's learning needs. Principals and teams of teachers conduct various formative assessments to identify which instructional practices are successful and which ones to revise. Teachers plan together, learn together, and foster collective responsibility for every student's success. Multiple interventions within classrooms and schools are available to proactively address student learning needs.

**Teaching quality matters.** The best teachers step into the roles that allow them to affect the students who need them the most. As Haycock states, strong leaders make sure their strongest teachers are not teaching just the high-end students, but those who need them the most. Traditionally, schools with the largest populations of poor and minority students have the most inexperienced teachers. To take advantage of the strengths of every teacher and to support all teachers in improving their instructional practices, teachers collaborate to plan instruction, develop and score assessments, and reflect on their practices so that what the most experienced and most effective teachers know is known by every teacher.

Teacher leaders and coaches have five primary responsibilities to ensure equity in students' education. They:

1. Communicate high expectations for self, students, and staff;
2. Support their colleagues in doing the same;
3. Work with staff to understand the impact of their attitudes, background, culture, and social class on teaching and learning;
4. Contribute to the development of a learning environment that is emotionally and physically safe for students and staff; and
5. Demonstrate respect and appreciation for students, staff, and their families for their

family heritage, language, and cultural background (Killion & Harrison, 2006).

Educators set high expectations and create productive learning environments that foster and support student and teacher learning. By focusing on eliminating unevenness and inequities in learning for every student and for every educator, the achievement gap will diminish. Sadly, both educators and policy makers continue to believe that poor and minority students cannot learn at the same levels as other students. "That myth holds on, but it's dead wrong," Haycock insists (p. 29). Substantial research supports her. By telling their stories, identifying turnaround schools, and engaging in examining research about what it takes to close the achievement gap, The Education Trust has amassed the evidence to make the doubters question their beliefs. The organization can point to specific practices that all schools can implement to ensure that every student achieves. To make academic success a reality for every student, teachers and principals engage in continuous professional learning, collaborate about their practices, share collective responsibility, and hold one another accountable.

#### References

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